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ABSTRACT

This booklet discusses literacy development in preschool children, the implications of literacy programs for such children, and the stages of children's writing development. The booklet notes that by age 2, children are aware that printed words play a major role in everyday life, and as they learn to talk, they are developing the skills necessary to learn to read and write. To encourage literacy development, the booklet recommends a learning environment that provides preschoolers with security and support, real-life literacy experiences, and access to and interaction with printed materials. It suggests that young children can be exposed to print through labels, signs, charts, and lists in the classroom; the integration of literacy into dramatic play; drawing and writing activities; storytelling and reading experiences; and planned group literacy experiences. Samples of the stages of writing development are provided, including scribbling, distinguishing pictures from print, writing approximation, print practice, and alphabetic writing. (MDM)

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PLAYING WITH PRINT

Jennifer Sumsion

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PLAYING WITH PRINT

JENNIFER SUMSION

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INTRODUCTION

Traditionally caregivers of children under five have focussed on the development of oral language and have resisted the idea that reading and writing should play a vital role in young children's language programs.

This is not surprising as learning to read and write was for many years regarded as an arduous learning task requiring a period of intense instruction that could only begin after children had mastered a carefully sequenced series of pre-reading and pre-writing skills. This view is still evident in some of the commercially produced "readiness packages" which have been adapted from programs designed for older children and now intended for three and four year olds. Realising that formal reading and writing instruction is inappropriate for young children, many teachers have chosen to limit their literacy programs to providing enjoyable story experiences, backed up by a comfortable book corner, and a readily available "drawing table".

However, new insights into literacy development in young children have been developing rapidly during the last decade. In light of the knowledge now available about how children learn to read and write, perhaps it is time to rethink this position and to explore ways of broadening and enriching literacy programs for children in early childhood centres.

WHAT DO WE KNOW ABOUT LITERACY DEVELOPMENT IN CHILDREN UNDER FIVE?

Learning To Read And Write Begins Early In Life And Is An Ongoing Process

Because infants and toddlers are surrounded by print, an awareness of print is developing almost from birth. Inevitably, young children who live in a "print-rich" environment are constantly observing and learning about written language. Their learning occurs naturally, as part of their daily lives.

Many two year olds are very aware that print plays a major role in our every day routines. They see family members and caregivers writing shopping lists, telephone messages and reminder notes to be placed on the fridge or notice board. They watch intently as adults fill out forms, and use credit cards, and they delight in the opportunity to join in. They see a very obvious use for recipes and advertising flyers. They learn very quickly that print plays an important part in our lives because it has the capacity to get things done.

From an early age children also learn that print has an important social function. Birthday and Christmas cards, letters and postcards enable us to keep in touch with friends and relatives. Television guides and newspapers allow us to organise our entertainment, while books and magazines can give many moments of pleasure.

Many children see older siblings, and increasingly, parents, using print as part of homework assignments, and often have a strong desire to join in with what is very obviously an important and prestigious activity. Learning to use print signifies gaining both status and power.

The Processes Involved In Learning To Read And Write Are Very Similar To The Processes Involved In Learning To Speak

Learning to talk is a formidable task but one which babies and toddlers set about with great enthusiasm. They practise with vigour the skills involved in communicating—crying, cooing, babbling, and later, first attempts at words. The sequence in their oral language development

is readily observable, and each new accomplishment is met with a very positive response from parents and caregivers. Noticeably there is little sense of urgency to adopt adult notions of correctness. Adults tend to respond to the meaning of what has been said, rather than to the inaccuracies which will inevitably be part of these early approximations of conventional speech. There is freedom to experiment, to take risks, to make mistakes, to play around with words, and to consolidate each new achievement. Children determine the pace of their learning and the direction it will take. As they become more confident users of language they become more adventurous and more likely to extend their known patterns of language to make new ones. Gradually they become more aware of the rules of our language system.

This process is a developmental one. We accept that beginning efforts at speech will be very different to more mature efforts. The same process applies equally to the development of written language as it does to the development of oral language. It is important that we create for beginning readers and writers the same type of secure and accepting environment that has been so favourable for their language development to date.

Children learn from an early age that print has an important social function.

All Aspects of Language Development Are Taking Place Concurrently

The old belief that children must be fluent speakers before being introduced to written language has been replaced with an awareness that all aspects of language development (listening, speaking, reading and writing) are taking place concurrently. Children do not wait to become fluent talkers before beginning to develop as readers and writers. Nor do they delay learning to write until they have become reasonably fluent readers. Children are developing literacy skills long before their reading and writing begin to approximate conventional adult models of reading and writing.

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WHAT ARE THE IMPLICATIONS FOR LITERACY PROGRAMS FOR UNDER FIVES?

Because young children are already very active participants in the literacy learning process, it is important that we provide children in our centres with as many opportunities as possible to continue this process. We can do this by establishing an environment which fosters literacy development in a natural, spontaneous way. What type of environment is most conducive to encouraging on-going literacy development?

1. Children Need Security And Support

As with all learning, children learn best about literacy in a secure and supportive atmosphere where their attempts are not fettered by conventional notions of correctness, but accepted and welcomed by adults who care about the messages the children wish to share. Children need adults who are aware of the importance of their early attempts to write, and who take the time to listen and respond to the scribbled stories even though they may be unintelligible to all but the children who wrote them. Strickland (1989) writes of a preschool teacher who spoke of her amusement as an eager young writer confidently began to share a story elicited from an entire page of scribbling. After a few moments of "reading", the child stopped abruptly, and apologetically exclaimed, "Oops, I wrote that twice!" I'm sure we would all have similar stories to tell. However, it is important that we don't simply dismiss these early literacy efforts as "cute" or "just scribbling" for this would be to fail to appreciate their significance.

Children need adults who are aware of the importance of their early attempts to write.

2. Children Need Real Life Literacy Experiences

Apart from providing encouragement, supportive adults will also ensure that they provide appropriate models for children to emulate. It is important that children not only see adults using print, but that they have the opportunity to talk about the processes involved. Perhaps interested children could be regularly invited to "help" you write messages, lists and signs as the need arises. Similarly, shared book experiences enable children to observe competent adult readers while participating themselves in "reading along" and so gaining a feel for what it is like to be a reader.

We need to ensure that we are providing opportunities for children to participate in literacy activities that form an integral part of everyday life. Involving the children in writing shopping lists and ticking off the items as they are purchased, listing ingredients needed for a recipe and crossing them off as they are used, making captions and labels for displays, constructing charts or posters indicating centre routines, and recording important events such as excursions and celebrations or any newsworthy item are very purposeful experiences for early readers and writers. Regular participation in activities such as these enable children to see more clearly the link between oral and written language.

3. Children Need To Be Surrounded By Print

An environment which is "rich" in print provides opportunities for children to be constantly observing and learning about written language. Being surrounded by print which is meaningful to them is a powerful motivator and springboard for beginning readers and writers. Children also need access to literacy materials – a wide range of books, writing implements and paper should be freely available.

4. Children Need To Play With Print

Any learning environment for young children should be primarily based on play because it is through play that children learn to make sense of their world. Helping children understand the world around them through acquiring new knowledge is a major commitment that we, as caregivers, have made. In the same way that we provide opportunities for children to play with sand, water, clay and blocks, we need to provide opportunities for children to play with print. If we limited children's access to print we would be denying them valuable opportunities to experiment with a very powerful medium. Learning about print should be a natural part of children's play.

Dramatic play areas, which can be modified or converted as the focus of children's play changes, have long been part of early childhood settings. We are all aware of how invaluable they are, particularly in relation to promoting social and language development by allowing children to try on a variety of different roles. One important role which we can encourage children to explore, is that of a user of reading and writing.

PUTTING IT INTO PRACTICE: ORGANISING THE ENVIRONMENT TO SUPPORT LITERACY LEARNING

Providing Functional Literacy Experiences

All early childhood centres need a considerable degree of organisation if they are to run smoothly. Involving the children in routines that help organise the physical environment and enable time to be allocated effectively, can be very worthwhile. Not only will children tend to be more committed to maintaining routines if they have been personally involved in establishing them, but they will have had the opportunity to experience print being used in a very purposeful way. Schickedanz (1986) makes many useful suggestions concerning ways in which children can be involved in functional literacy experiences.

LABELS

(i) Lockers can be labelled with children's names in addition to a photograph of each "owner". Children often like to know which locker belongs to whom.

(ii) Containers can be labelled with both print and picture to indicate contents. Shelves can be similarly labelled to indicate where containers should be placed. Adults will probably need to model the matching process involved in returning equipment to the appropriate place. "I'll put the textas away. This is where they go. See where it says 'textas'." Children would probably enjoy being involved in preparing the labels and attaching them to the containers and shelves, especially if they are allowed to decide where various items might best be placed.

SIGNS

(i) The number of children able to participate in a particular area at any one time is often indicated by the number of chairs placed around the activity table or the number of aprons hanging next to the painting easels or water trough. In addition, perhaps children could help you make signs to indicate this information. It's preferable to involve the children in decisions about the number of children who can participate in an activity.

(ii) Routines, rules or directions can also be sign posted. If the children are involved in the creation of the signs they will be more aware of the contents. Children often become very enthusiastic about signs, and will be keen to suggest the need for new ones!

Many centres find it helpful to display signs indicating the daily routines. While these may have been originally designed primarily for adult use, with minor adaptations they can usually be an interesting source of information for the children, especially if the children's help is enlisted in keeping them up to date.

Children enjoy being involved in the preparation of signs and labels.

CHARTS

Charts contain a wide range of information which can be accessed by young children. Perhaps the most commonly used charts are attendance charts and helpers' charts. Alphabetically arranged attendance charts enable children to observe this type of print organisation, and it is surprising how much intuitive understanding children tend to develop about alphabetical order. If names are accompanied by photographs of the children, they will quickly learn to recognise not only their own names but also the names of many of the other children in the group. Easy access to names tends to encourage children to incorporate them in a variety of ways in their drawings.

Helpers' charts are generally most useful when jobs are assigned on a daily rather than weekly basis because this will provide more opportunities for children to refer to the chart.

LISTS

Lists can also be very useful in enabling the centre to run smoothly while at the same time providing children with functional experiences with print. This is especially so if a list is used whenever an exciting new toy or piece of equipment is introduced to the centre. When many children are likely to want a turn, a fair way to solve the problem is to use a "turn-taking" list. Children should be encouraged to write their own name on the list and to cross it off when they have finished their turn. Children may need adult help to decipher the list, but in doing so many valuable opportunities to talk about print arise.

Lists of items to take along on walks, lists of favourite foods, lists of songs children know, shopping lists . . . the list could go on indefinitely. Involving children in list making exposes them in a very meaningful way to the notion that print helps us keep track of things.

As Schickedanz (1986) comments, providing a wide range of opportunities such as these for children to use print is one of the best ways to help children develop literacy knowledge because there is a very real purpose to the experience. As well, the routine nature of these experiences provides lots of opportunities for repeated encounters with print, which is so important in helping children learn.

Integrating Literacy Learning Into Dramatic Play

The possibilities are limitless. All of the common dramatic play themes—home corner, doctor's surgery, police station, restaurant, supermarket, classroom, office, travel agency and so on—lend themselves very easily to "literacy enrichment", because they represent common real life situations where the need for literacy is evident.

The type of props available tend to influence the direction of the play.

In any play situation the type of props available tend to influence the direction the play will take. The introduction of dolls and dolls' clothes to the home corner will lead to "parenting" play, while the introduction of kitchen utensils, a stove, and table and chairs will encourage cooking and eating related play.

In the same way, the introduction of a telephone, telephone directory, personal telephone/address book, telephone message pad, and a magnetic memo board for telephone messages is likely to promote telephone conversation and message taking role play.

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Preferably props should be authentic. I like to use real forms, cards, memo pads and diaries rather than teacher made "pretend" versions. Where possible choose props which children are more likely to have experienced in real life situations so that they have some degree of prior knowledge and familiarity to extend on through play.

Like all play situations, it's best to introduce new props gradually as the need arises. Look for opportunities to extend the direction the children have spontaneously taken. If shopping trips have become a popular feature of home corner play then the introduction of note pads, pencils, and supermarket advertising flyers is likely to encourage an element of literacy related play which may have not otherwise emerged.

Children may not incorporate the props in the way you had intended but as with any play, it's important to allow children to take the lead and to respect their spontaneity and innovations. Schickedanz (1986) stresses that play should fulfil the children's purposes, not our preconceived ideas of what should be taught. Children will learn about print simply by using print related props in their play. Their play should not be distorted in order to teach any specific literacy skill.

Children will learn about print simply by using print related props.

When children invite us to join their play, it may be appropriate to use the opportunity to demonstrate our knowledge of particular print conventions, or simply to extend on the children's understanding of the roles people play in various settings. Schickedanz (1986: 114) includes an example, "I see you have an overflow of patients today, doctor. I'll be the receptionist and find magazines for people to read in the waiting room until you are ready to see them". As the receptionist you might organise an appointment book and make out appointment cards for departing patients. However, it's important not to stay involved for long as children should take the lead in directing their play.

The Drawing and Writing Table

This should be a permanent feature of any early childhood centre and should be available to children during any free activity period. It need only take up enough space to comfortably accommodate four children at any one time, although a storage shelf for writing materials will also be needed.

Building up an interesting collection of stationary is worthwhile. Children enjoy having access to paper in a variety of sizes, colours, shapes and textures. Used stamps, envelopes, postcards, and assorted greeting cards tend to encourage young letter writers. A booklet listing the names of all the children at the centre with accompanying photographs, placed next to an official looking letter box which is emptied daily also leads to a great deal of correspondence. Children often like to make greeting cards for special occasions, and find a word bank featuring appropriate phrases such as "Happy birthday", "Thank you", "Goodbye and goodluck" and "Welcome back" very helpful.

Most four year olds and many younger children appreciate having a personalised booklet, often called a journal, for more private drawing and writing. Journals are usually very simply constructed of several blank pieces of paper stapled together with an attractive cover. These can be a very valuable record of children's writing development, especially if children are encouraged to date stamp each entry.

Young writers need regular help and encouragement.

An attractive alphabet chart or frieze prominently displayed in the drawing/writing area is a useful support and discussion point for young writers. Very simple picture dictionaries are similarly useful. Some children enjoy the rather formal commercially produced "pre-writing" stencils which are still a feature in some school beginners' classrooms, but these are best used sparingly as they tend to give a distorted idea of what learning to write is all about.

An appealing selection of pencils, crayons, textas, rubbers, and pencil sharpeners is likely to tempt even the more disinterested children to the writing table. Magic slates, a range of stamps and a stamp pad, carbon paper and, providing safety aspects and the level of adult supervision is taken into account, hole punches and staplers, are also enticing to most children.

Perhaps the biggest drawcard to the writing table, though, is the teacher who regularly sits down to write alongside the children and who provides incidental help and encouragement to fellow writers when needed.

While an attractive and stimulating drawing and writing table is vital, it's also important to provide easy access to writing materials throughout the centre including the outdoor play area. A range of messages, signs and labels will most likely appear – PLS KPOT (on door of cubby house), DO NOT LIK TEH NIF (cooking area), KIMS LGO and DONT PAKUWA (construction area).

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You may find an intriguingly stocked "writing briefcase" available for overnight borrowing is a great hit with the children while at the same time providing a valuable way of sharing with parents an important aspect of the centre's program.

It is important to provide writing materials throughout the centre including the outdoor play area.

Story Experiences And The Book Corner

The importance of reading to children regularly, and sharing with them a rich diet of carefully chosen literature is almost impossible to over emphasise. So, too, is the value of a comfortable and inviting book corner to which children can retreat to relive shared story experiences and try out the role of a reader. Children need many enjoyable and satisfying experiences with books if they are to become successful literacy learners. Only through exposure to a wide range of literature do children learn about books.

As children gain experience with books they begin to understand how books work. They learn that there are many conventions associated with print—that it is read from top to bottom and left to right, that it is not put together randomly, but in a way that makes sense, and that the order doesn't change regardless of how many times the print is read. As children become more familiar with particular texts they begin to recognise patterns in the flow and rhythm of the text. They begin to anticipate developments in the plot, and learn to predict what words will come next. Anticipation and prediction, based on the understanding that print is meant to make sense, are key skills in learning to read. This is why the rereading of favourite stories is so important. Children also learn that while print and speech are related, book language does differ from spoken language.

Children quickly realise that books can open up new worlds, which often enables them to come to terms more easily with their own world. Most importantly, children realise that books are enjoyable and fun. Adults who are able to share their own pleasure in books and who are able to introduce to children a wide range of high quality literature are playing a vital role in children's literacy development.

Planned Group Literacy Experiences

Most group experiences in early childhood centres are already very much language based, and could easily be extended to incorporate a literacy element. Formal sessions focussing on isolated literacy skills are not recommended because children learn much more effectively through integrated, rather than fragmented experiences.

News and sharing sessions may be enhanced by the teacher scribing for interested children the key newsworthy item of the day. Children tend to be very interested in choice of letters and layout, and are often quick to recognise letters and letter clusters they may have observed in other contexts. Many children take pride in reading "the news" to each other, their parents or to visitors in the centre. Some may enjoy taking home overnight a collated book of news to read to their family.

Visitors who come to talk about their jobs are a common feature of many centres' language programs. Traditionally, they bring with them an interesting assortment of tools of trade. Schickedanz (1986: 114) suggests that teachers make a special effort to help visitors bring along print related props. For example, a nurse often brings along a stethoscope and a tongue depressor, but can also be asked to bring a health or a vision chart. A thank you note sent to each visitor also allows children to participate in a valuable literacy experience.

Excursions, too, can provide wonderful opportunities to point out print in the environment, and the ways in which children may notice people using print. This often leads to enriched play with print back in the centre.

All early childhood educators are aware that regular story sessions are an essential component of any literacy program, but sometimes overlook opportunities to provide for extended discussion and further exploration of favourite texts. Children often enjoy envisioning themselves in the role of key characters and discussing how they would react to the situations which unfold in the story. They may have ideas about alternative endings, or a sequel to the original. Many texts with a strong repetitive pattern lend themselves to adaptation, or creation of additional verses. Recording the children's ideas can be a worthwhile literacy experience.

Children tend to have a natural interest in storytelling, and welcome adult help in getting their ideas on to paper. Group stories told "in the round" and scripts for puppet shows are alternatives to an adult scribing for an individual child. Brainstorming activities not only encourage lateral thinking, but may also stimulate an interest in recording ideas. Most children love adding to collections, and would enjoy contributing to a communal book of jokes and riddles.

STAGES IN CHILDREN'S WRITING DEVELOPMENT

Because the process of learning to write is highly personal, no two children will develop in exactly the same way. Writing development often appears haphazard, particularly as children have a tendency to experiment simultaneously with a number of techniques. However it is possible to describe a number of stages through which most children seem to pass on their way to becoming conventional writers, although it must be stressed that these stages are not necessarily sequential nor apply to all children.

Scribbling

This stage begins when children first come into contact with pencil and paper. One of the first understandings children develop is the link between a writing implement, arm movements and marks which can be made to appear. Walls and furniture often take a beating as children discover a new way to make an impact on their environment! Fascination with the writing implements themselves is eventually replaced with interest in the marks made. There may be attempts to reproduce the same type of mark, but in the early stages of scribbling it is unlikely that children actually set out to draw anything. If what they create happens to remind them of something then they might verbally label it accordingly as Max has done in FIGURE 1.

When children show signs of thinking about what they might draw before beginning to put marks on the paper, they are approaching a new stage of development. Questions such as "What can I draw?" indicate that children are moving on to intentional pictorial representation (Schickedanz,1990). Scribbling gradually becomes more controlled and recognisable drawings begin to emerge.

Figure 1
Scribbling

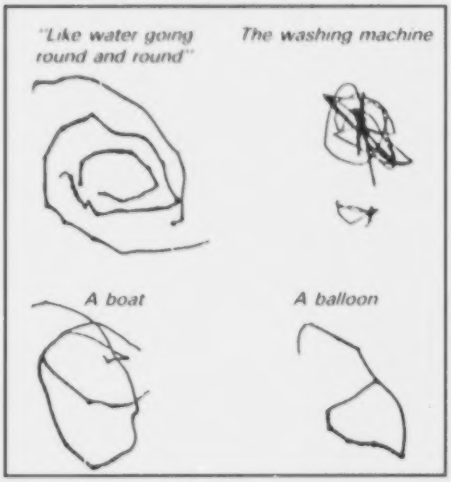


Figure 2
Writing is different from drawing

Distinguishing Pictures From Print

By about age three, most children who have had ample opportunities to explore print have developed an understanding that drawing is different from writing. This is an important developmental step. Harsle (1990) points out that no matter whether their "writing" consists of "squiggles and wriggles", small controlled shapes that resemble letters, or a smattering of randomly arranged conventional letters and numerals, the marks most three year olds will make on paper when asked to write their name will look quite different to the marks they make when asked to draw a picture of themselves.

We see this clearly in Toak's efforts in FIGURE 2. During the next few years, children will gradually refine their understanding of what print is and how it works, and will master most writing conventions, providing, of course, that they have plenty of opportunities to play around with print.

Gibson (1989) suggests that during the preschool and early school years, children's writing techniques consist of three general approaches: writing approximation, print practice, and alphabetic writing.

Writing Approximation

Most children spend a considerable amount of time experimenting with writing by reproducing forms that look like writing. In her shopping list (FIGURE 3) Susan demonstrates her awareness that writing consists of the same moves repeated over and over again (Temple et al, 1990).

In FIGURES 4 and 5 we see that Nicole and Adam understand that writing can be created by using only a few characters and repeating them in different combinations. These children have developed some idea of what words look like and will be likely to ask available adults to tell them what their words say. Eventually they will realise that just because a group of letters looks like a word doesn't necessarily mean that it is a word and will look for more effective word making strategies.

Figure 3
Forms that look like writing
Susan (age 3) grocery list (Temple Nathan and Burris, 1982: 33)

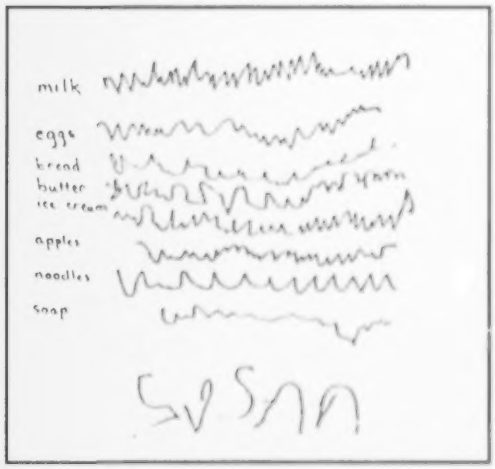


Figure 4
Repeating the same letters in different combinations
Nicole (4–5 years) 28.3.90

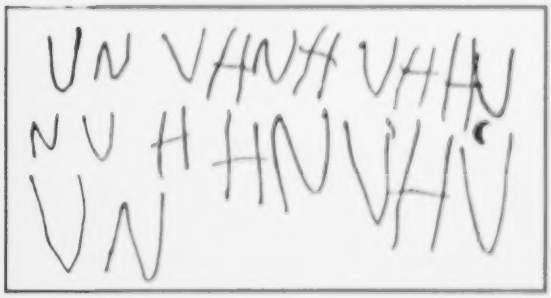
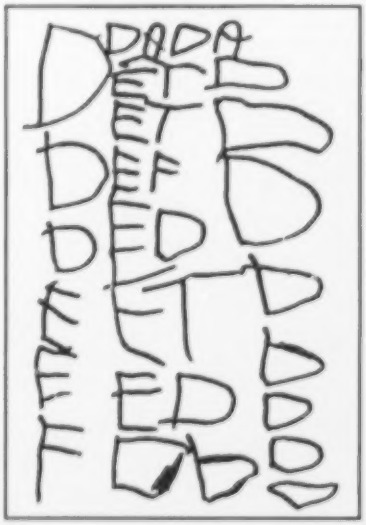


Figure 5
Adam's list of words
(Schickedanz, 1990: 20)



Children also need to experiment with the spatial organisation of print on a page (FIGURE 6). This child seems very aware that print proceeds in lines and fills up most of the available space.

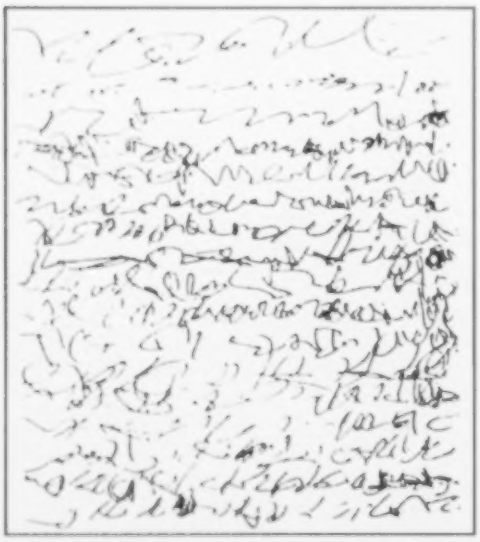
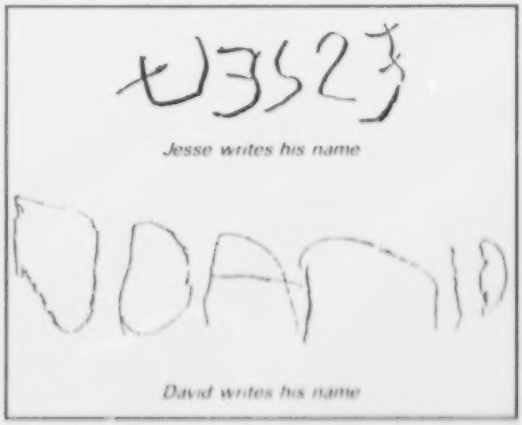


Figure 6
Scribble writing created by a child imitating her mother's notetaking at a meeting (Schickedanz, 1986: 82)

Print Practice

The first letters children tend to notice are those letters in their names. Children generally take much pleasure in learning to write their names. Temple et al (1982) refer to this as a "trail blazing event" as children are learning how each letter needs to be shaped, the sequence of the letters needed, and that they have to be written from left to right (FIGURE 7).

Figure 7
Mastering one's name (Gibson, 1989: 87-88)



By age three some children have already begun to write their name, although usually the skill is not mastered until age five. Younger children are often surprised to find that the length of someone's name is not related to their age, size or importance! Schickedanz (1990) describes how children tend to operate on the principle that you write as much of your name as you can, and then you fill in the empty spaces with marks that look as if they belong there.

Pattern making with strings of letters is another satisfying task for many young children because, by filling up page after page in this way, they gain a sense of achievement and security as we can see in FIGURES 8 and 9.

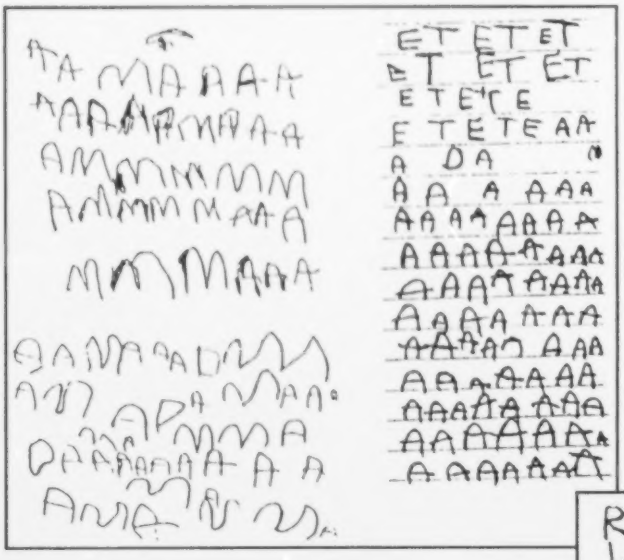


Figure 8
Adam's experiments with letter patterns (Schickedanz, 1991: 27)

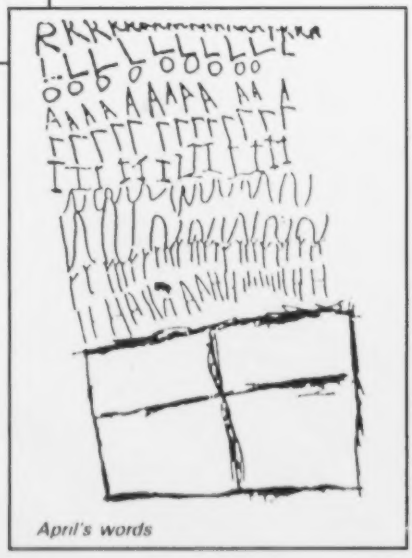


Figure 9
Pattern-making with letters (Gibson, 1989: 92)

Alphabetic Writing

Inviting children to read what they have written often results in a fascinating response. Some children, while convinced they can write, will be quite indignant if asked to read what they have written—"I can't read yet, I'm only four!" Other children will ignore their writing completely, look far into the distance, and launch into a long, complicated story that apparently has nothing to do with the marks made on paper. Eventually, however, children come to realise that there is a relationship between the spoken and written word, and that each mark on the paper needs to represent a spoken word or syllable. There will be a movement away from letter-like marks, and more noticeable interest in, and use of, actual letters of the alphabet.

Children will want to know what sounds different letters make. The focus will shift from how words look to how words sound. A major breakthrough in the movement from "make-believe" writing to "real" writing occurs when children realise that their choice of letters depends on the sounds those letters represent. We see this in Annie's work in FIGURE 10.

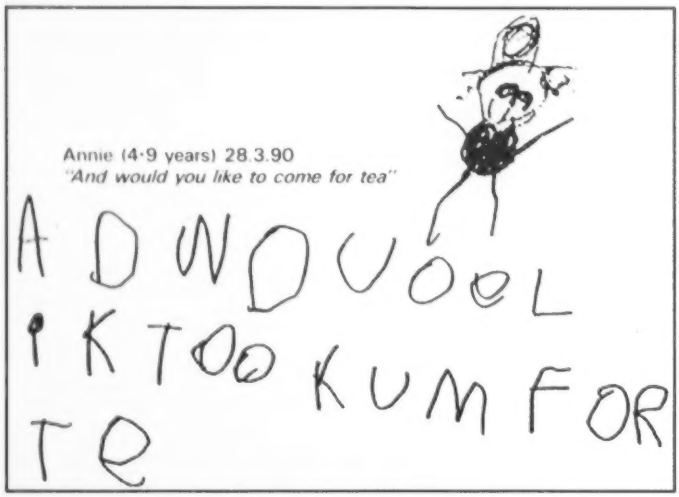


Figure 10
The choice of letters depends on sounds they represent

When children make this discovery they tend to quickly develop an ingenuous repertoire of invented spelling strategies. Children at this stage of development will have lots of questions—"How do you write 'sh'?", "Does 'caterpillar' start with a 'c' or a 'k'?"

As their spelling strategies become more sophisticated, adults with some ingenuity and knowledge of the context in which the writing has been undertaken, will become more able to decipher children's writing. Children develop a new sense of personal power as they become aware of their ability to share their thoughts, feelings and stories through print.

By providing the type of supportive and stimulating environment described above—where children are surrounded by examples of print, where they see adults using print in a meaningful way, where opportunities occur naturally for children to use print as part of their play, and where adults welcome children into the community of readers and writers and support their efforts to communicate through print—children will learn a great deal about the processes involved in reading and writing.

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